Guest Opinion: Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater | Insanity vs. Creativity: Taking Risks to Combat Homelessness

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[Updated] In addressing problems and ways of solving them, one of the more well-worn quotes comes from Einstein: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. While this explains a core challenge, it doesn’t really focus on new outcomes. For that, we need
something bolder and visionary: we need creativity.

In searching for appropriate definitions of the word ‘creativity,’ especially outside of the artistic realm, I really liked this one: “Being creative means solving a problem in a new way. It means changing your perspective. Being creative means taking risks and ignoring doubt and facing fears. It means breaking with routine and doing something different for the sake of doing something different.” (Tanner Christenson) As I think about homelessness and the seemingly overwhelming challenges we face in our city, it is this definition, rather than Einstein’s of insanity, that makes more sense to me.

Setting aside Einstein’s insanity theory, I won’t use this space to critique the ongoing attempts at the same solutions, most of which have not worked. Instead, here are some creative ways that we might address the problems, as other cities have. Remember, being creative requires “seeing a problem in a new way...taking risks, ignoring doubt and facing fears.”

We know that skyrocketing costs of housing are an epidemic in our city. So, why not buy a large piece of land and develop a “tiny home” village, complete with social services, case management and systems in place to support the individuals we house there? Or create an RV park, with the same services as above? Both of these ideas involve taking risk and ignoring doubt. And both of these ideas are cheaper to create and could be developed much quicker than waiting another decade to build a new building or renovate an existing structure. Are we ready to do something
different, break with routine? This has been done successfully in Austin, TX, when a visionary real estate developer named Alan Graham created Community First! Village, although not without resistance, and persistent tenacity:

“For seven years, Graham searched for a plot of land in Austin to build his vision of an RV park for the chronically homeless. Perhaps not surprisingly, that idea triggered fierce not-in-my-backyard opposition from neighborhood groups. In 2008, Austin’s City Council voted unanimously to grant Community First! a long-term ground lease on 17 acres of city-owned land. But neighborhood resistance was intense: After a community meeting ‘exploded into Armageddon,’ Graham says, he gave up on building within the city, and, in 2014, purchased 27 acres just outside city limits in Travis County. One year later, he started moving people into RVs and tiny homes.” This is a village with social services, case management, community support. Read more about it here: (https://www.citylab.com/design/2018/11/community-first-village-homeless-tiny-homes-austin-texas/575611/). Which developer is willing to step in with a vision like Graham?

Another major challenge we face is the rising number of seniors on our streets. A recent attempt to convert a motel into permanent supportive housing was shouted down (or exploded into Armageddon) by a handful of residents, after an admittedly poor planning process. Are these folks willing to stand up and publicly say that they don’t want 50 homeless men and women, 60+ years old, moving into an old motel with the same social services described above? We could have moved them in, provided meals in the breakfast room of the motel and creatively been a leader in addressing homelessness.

Lastly, we are seeing a rise in mental illness that affects homeless individuals, many of whom would be able to function better in society if they had medication and regular treatment. Are we willing to be creative and perhaps convert an empty storefront
into an emergency mental health treatment center, equipped with beds, doctors and staff to care for these folks? What about the gigantic old Borders bookstore that has been sitting empty for over 5 years? What about St. Luke’s Hospital, an absolutely perfect location for both of these ideas combined—again, sitting empty for at least a decade? Are we willing to change our perspective?

Einstein’s insanity definition will keep leading us back to the same conversations, the same doubt, the same stalemate that we have found ourselves in for years. Another phrase that people are fond of is, “where there is a will, there is a way.” If all of us, community members, elected officials, religious institutions and people of good will want to make this happen, then only creativity will take us home. Who is ready to take risks and be creative? Who has the will to find the way?
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